

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STDs)

A sexually transmitted disease (STD) is spread from one person to another during sexual intercourse when one partner is already infected, or when someone receives blood or other body fluids from an infected person. There are several types of STDs, the causative organisms being bacteria, viruses and parasites. In this article, we will consider only the most common and important STD agents. These are:

- Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV 1 & 2), which causes AIDS.
- Gonorrhoea, *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* (bacteria)
- Syphilis, *Treponema pallidum* (bacteria)
- Chancroid, *Haemophilus ducreyi* (bacteria)
- Genital Chlamydia infection, *Chlamydia trachomatis* (bacteria)
- Genital warts (human papillomavirus)
- Herpes simplex virus 1 & 2
- Hepatitis B and C viruses
- Scabies caused by parasitic skin mites called *Sarcoptes scabiei*.
- Pubic lice (“crab lice”), *Phthirus pubis*
- *Trichomonas vaginalis*, a single-celled parasite
- Donovanosis, *Calymatobacterium inguinale* (“Lymphogranuloma” bacteria)

Where do STDs occur?

STDs occur throughout the world and it is estimated that there are up to 200 million cases per year. About 80% of the infections occur in the developing world because of lower socio-economic standards and poorer access to STD clinics and appropriate drugs. Syphilis, gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and Herpes simplex are worldwide pathogens. Chancroid and Donovanosis, which cause genital sores, are diseases largely of the tropics and subtropics. Some STDs, such as gonorrhoea, are becoming resistant to many drugs. HIV infections are still more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else, although incidence continues to rise in other areas, particularly in Asia.

Transmission among travellers

Many tourists still look for “Sun, Sand, and Sex” during international travel. They behave quite differently away from home, throwing all caution to the wind. Tourists may have sexual contact with local persons or with prostitutes, who are at high risk of carrying STDs. Careless consumption of alcohol often leads to unprotected sex with virtual strangers. Even though condom use is increasing, unprotected sex still occurs frequently among international travellers especially those who want to experience the culture of the local people!

STDs, which are normally transmitted from blood or body fluids during sexual intercourse (HIV, Hepatitis) may also be acquired by contact with non-sterile intravenous needles, infected lancets, or contaminated surgical instruments.

What are the signs and symptoms of STDs?

The symptoms of STDs vary considerably and include vaginal and urethral discharges, genital ulceration, genital inflammation, pain or itching in and around the genitals, jaundice, headaches, abdominal pains, skin rash and arthritis. When ulceration occurs, the appearance of the ulcer is very characteristic and can be used to differentiate between the syphilis ulcer, also called a chancre, and other ulcers. Significantly, pain with ulceration is more characteristic of Chancroid or Herpes. Chancroid ulcers vary in size and have ragged or rotten looking borders. Intensely itchy genital lesions are usually seen in scabies. Pubic lice

also cause an intense itch in the pubic region and the insects can be seen among the hairs. *Trichomonas vaginalis* causes a frothy, greenish vaginal discharge but may not cause obvious symptoms in the male partner. Some infections, such as Chlamydia, can be “silent” for a long period, causing damage long after infection. Laboratory tests are normally required in order to make a proper accurate diagnosis.

What is the incubation period?

This is the time during which a new infection remains hidden even to the infected person. The various STDs have different incubation periods as follows:

- Gonorrhoea: 2 -10 days
- Hepatitis B: 12 - 60 days
- Chlamydia: 2 days to 4 weeks
- Chancroid: 3 - 6 days
- Donovanosis: 6 weeks to 1 year
- Syphilis: 3 - 6 weeks
- Human papillomavirus: 1 month to 1.5 years
- Herpes simplex: 4 - 10 days
- HIV 1 & 2: 2 weeks to 10 years

What are the necessary precautions?

Education of travellers in the prevention of STDs is part of the standard pre-travel counselling at any Travel Clinic. Abstinence from casual sex during travel is the gold standard. If this is unlikely, condom use becomes an absolute necessity. Uncertain travellers should take a supply of condoms with them because they may be unavailable in many of the more remote destinations. It is worth remembering that sex with an individual exposes one to all their previous sexual partners! Most STD pathogens do not survive for long outside the infected host. Usually the organisms die as soon as the fluids are dry, but they are highly communicable through sexual contact or by transfusion of blood or body fluids. This is why it is wise not to receive blood transfusions except from a reputable hospital.

Are there any drugs or vaccines to prevent STDs?

Although there are some preventative drugs for a limited number of STDs (e.g. gonorrhoea), it is not practical to administer them under many circumstances and their use is generally not advised. The only vaccine available for travellers to prevent an STD is that for Hepatitis B.

Treatment

Travellers who develop a symptomatic STD should seek medical attention from qualified doctors urgently to avoid travelling back home with the disease. Self-treatment of STDs is not advised. Sadly, many innocent spouses have been infected by their errant better halves returning from exotic places. There are no quick fixes in the treatment of most STDs and in fact some have no appropriate cure. Inevitably, the stress of having an STD can bring untold suffering and depression, with various repercussions on relationships and family life.

Recommendations for travellers

1. Avoid sexual contact with strangers or casual partners and remember that in the absence of a regular partner, abstinence is the best option.
2. Avoid situations that tend to lead to carelessness in sexual behaviour such as drunkenness and erotic partying.
3. Use condoms when in any doubt about a sexual partner.

4. If an STD is suspected seek proper and urgent medical attention. Do not self-treat.